

LIFELONG LEARNING IN HO CHI MINH'S THOUGHT: AN APPROACH TO HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: Lifelong learning has become an essential requirement for higher education in the context of digital transformation, the knowledge economy, and the rapidly changing labor market. Drawing upon textual analysis and a theoretical approach, this article examines the core principles of lifelong learning in Ho Chi Minh's thought, including learning as a responsibility of both individuals and society; learning for holistic human development and service to the nation; learning closely connected with practice; and self-directed learning as the foundation of lifelong learning. Based on this theoretical framework, the article analyzes the ongoing reform of higher education in Vietnam from a lifelong learning perspective, identifies major achievements as well as existing challenges, and argues that Ho Chi Minh's thought continues to provide a valuable theoretical foundation for developing an open, flexible higher education system and fostering a culture of lifelong learning in contemporary Vietnam.

Keywords: Ho Chi Minh's thought; lifelong learning; higher education; educational reform; Vietnam

1. Introduction

During the first decades of the twenty-first century, rapid advances in science and technology, artificial intelligence, digital transformation, and the knowledge economy have fundamentally reshaped production systems, governance, and social life. Knowledge is no longer a stable resource but is constantly renewed and expanded, while the competencies required in the labor market continue to evolve at an unprecedented pace. Against this backdrop, lifelong learning has emerged as a strategic priority for many countries and international organizations seeking to enhance human adaptability to labor market changes and promote sustainable development. According to *The Future of Jobs Report 2023*, approximately 44% of

workers' core skills are expected to change within five years, while around 60% of the global workforce will require reskilling or upskilling before 2027 (World Economic Forum, 2023). Likewise, the OECD (2024) emphasizes that continuous learning throughout life has become a critical condition for maintaining individual competitiveness and adaptability in an increasingly dynamic world.

These transformations have also reshaped the mission of higher education. Whereas universities were traditionally regarded as institutions responsible for educating students during a limited stage of life, they are now increasingly expected to function as open, flexible, and interconnected learning systems capable of meeting the educational needs of learners across different age groups, career stages, and social contexts. Online education, blended learning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), micro-credentials, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and short-term professional training programs are gradually redefining the traditional role of universities—from degree-granting institutions to lifelong learning hubs serving the broader community.

In Vietnam, the development of a learning society and the promotion of lifelong learning have become central priorities in national development strategies. In recent years, digital transformation in higher education, the rapid expansion of online learning, open educational resources, short-term professional development programs, and stronger university–industry collaboration have created favorable conditions for expanding learning opportunities for all citizens. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain, including disparities in digital infrastructure across regions and institutions, uneven quality of online education, an underdeveloped framework for recognizing learning outcomes acquired through flexible learning pathways, and the continuing need to strengthen both self-directed learning competencies and a culture of lifelong learning throughout society.

In seeking theoretical foundations for higher education reform, Ho Chi Minh's educational thought remains highly relevant. For Ho Chi Minh, learning was not confined to a particular stage of life but constituted a continuous process closely associated with human development and social progress. He consistently emphasized

that learning is both an individual and a social responsibility; that learning must be integrated with practice, productive labor, and real-life experience; that people should learn everywhere—from schools, books, colleagues, and the people; and that self-directed learning represents the fundamental means through which individuals continuously improve themselves. Although these ideas emerged under historical conditions very different from those of today, many of their underlying principles continue to provide valuable insights for developing lifelong learning-oriented higher education in the era of digital transformation.

Existing scholarship has primarily examined Ho Chi Minh's educational thought from the perspectives of intellectual history, educational philosophy, or its application in ideological and political education. Meanwhile, studies on lifelong learning in Vietnam have focused predominantly on educational policy, digital transformation, or the construction of a learning society. The connection between these two strands of research remains relatively limited, particularly regarding the use of Ho Chi Minh's thought as a theoretical framework for interpreting contemporary higher education reform.

Addressing this research gap, this article examines the core principles of lifelong learning in Ho Chi Minh's thought and analyzes higher education reform in Vietnam through this theoretical lens. By comparing Ho Chi Minh's educational perspectives with contemporary developments in higher education, the study demonstrates the continuing relevance of his thought for developing a lifelong learning-oriented higher education model in Vietnam. In doing so, it contributes a theoretical perspective to the literature on lifelong learning while offering implications for higher education reform in the context of digital transformation and international integration.

2. Lifelong Learning in Ho Chi Minh's Thought

2.1. Lifelong Learning as the Responsibility of Both Individuals and Society

In Ho Chi Minh's thought, learning is not confined to formal schooling or to a particular stage of life; rather, it is a continuous process accompanying both

individual development and social progress. This perspective stems from his recognition of the dynamic nature of society and the continuous advancement of science and technology. As knowledge and production conditions constantly evolve, discontinuing learning inevitably leads to obsolescence. Ho Chi Minh therefore warned: *“Those who refuse to learn will fall behind, and to fall behind is to be eliminated”* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011e, p. 333). This statement is more than a moral exhortation; it reflects a developmental principle that lifelong learning is essential for individuals to adapt to social change and continuously enhance their capabilities.

From this standpoint, Ho Chi Minh extended the responsibility for learning beyond particular social groups to society as a whole. He emphasized that *“Men and women, the young and the old, cadres and workers—all must learn”* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011e, p. 460). Learning is therefore understood not only as a fundamental right but also as a shared responsibility of every individual toward personal development and national progress. This conception transcends the boundaries of formal education by affirming that all people, regardless of age, occupation, or social status, possess both the opportunity and the obligation to continue learning throughout their lives.

At the same time, Ho Chi Minh did not regard learning solely as an individual endeavor. He argued that society as a whole bears responsibility for creating the institutional conditions that enable lifelong learning. He called upon public agencies and organizations to establish systematic learning plans, organize regular educational activities, and consider learning outcomes as an important criterion in evaluating cadres and Party members (Ho Chi Minh, 2011a, pp. 271–272). This perspective suggests that lifelong learning depends not only on individual motivation but also on supportive institutional arrangements and public policies. From a contemporary perspective, these ideas provide an important theoretical foundation for developing a learning society and an open education system in which lifelong access to learning opportunities is guaranteed for all citizens.

2.2. Learning for Holistic Human Development and Service to Society

While emphasizing lifelong learning as an individual responsibility, Ho Chi Minh also clearly defined its ultimate purpose. In his view, learning is not merely a

means of acquiring knowledge or improving professional competence but a pathway toward the holistic development of individuals and the advancement of society. He repeatedly raised the question of *why people should learn* and offered a consistent answer: *“Learn to work, to become a better person, and to become a cadre. Learn to serve the Organization, the class, the people, the Fatherland, and humanity.”* This well-known statement illustrates two inseparable objectives of learning: the cultivation of individual capabilities and the fulfillment of social responsibility.

According to Ho Chi Minh, holistic human development requires the integrated cultivation of knowledge, moral character, and practical competence. He emphasized that *“If we wish to continue making progress, we must continue learning. Learn from books and newspapers, and learn through work”* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011c, p. 143). Learning is therefore a lifelong process through which individuals continuously improve themselves by combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Rather than simply accumulating information, education should cultivate critical thinking, moral integrity, and the capacity to solve real-world problems.

A distinctive feature of Ho Chi Minh's educational thought is the close integration of personal development with the common good. He argued that learning should first enable individuals to become competent workers, responsible citizens, and dedicated public servants, while ultimately preparing them to contribute to the people, the nation, and humanity. Consequently, he consistently linked learning with moral cultivation, encouraging individuals to *“learn to correct their thinking,” “learn to cultivate revolutionary morality,”* and *“learn in order to act”* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011b, pp. 360–361). In this perspective, the value of education is measured not by academic qualifications or social status but by the ability to transform knowledge into action, moral character, and meaningful contributions to society. This integration of self-development and social responsibility constitutes one of the defining characteristics of Ho Chi Minh's philosophy of lifelong learning, in which the growth of individuals is inseparable from the development of the community and the nation.

2.3. Learning Must Be Closely Connected with Practice

A defining characteristic of Ho Chi Minh's thought on lifelong learning is the close integration of knowledge and practice. In his view, the value of learning lies not in the accumulation of knowledge itself but in the ability to apply knowledge to address practical challenges in work and everyday life. Learning should therefore be inseparable from action, productive labor, and social practice. As Ho Chi Minh stated, *“Learning must go hand in hand with practice. Learning without practice is useless”* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011b, p. 361). This statement reflects an educational philosophy in which learning is understood as a process of transforming knowledge into practical competence rather than passively acquiring information.

Based on this principle, Ho Chi Minh argued that the content of learning should be comprehensive and responsive to the developmental needs of the nation. He maintained that individuals should study politics, culture, science, technology, and professional knowledge in order to continuously improve themselves and meet the evolving demands of national development (Ho Chi Minh, 2011e, p. 528). However, he did not regard these domains as separate areas of knowledge. Instead, he emphasized their complementary relationship, arguing that professional expertise must be integrated with political awareness and moral character. He warned that studying culture and technology without political orientation would be *“like walking with one's eyes closed”* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011d, p. 384). This perspective highlights the importance of holistic human development, in which professional competence is inseparable from ethical values and social responsibility.

Beyond emphasizing the unity of learning and practice, Ho Chi Minh also expanded the learning environment to encompass the whole of social life. Learning, in his view, should be closely connected with productive work, professional practice, and service to the people, while practical experience serves as the ultimate criterion for testing and refining knowledge. Such a perspective views lifelong learning not as the passive accumulation of knowledge within educational institutions but as a continuous interaction among learning, work, and social contribution. From this perspective, universities should be understood not merely as providers of knowledge

but as institutions that cultivate learners' capacities for application, innovation, and adaptation in response to changing socio-economic conditions.

2.4. Self-Directed Learning as the Foundation of Lifelong Learning

If the integration of learning and practice ensures the relevance of knowledge, self-directed learning constitutes the driving force that sustains learning throughout life. In Ho Chi Minh's thought, neither schools nor teachers can provide all the knowledge required in a society characterized by continuous change. Consequently, the capacity for self-directed learning plays a decisive role in individual development. Ho Chi Minh therefore emphasized that people should *“take self-study as the core”* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011a, p. 312), regarding it as the fundamental means through which individuals continuously expand their knowledge and improve themselves.

Ho Chi Minh's concept of self-directed learning, however, does not imply isolated or individualistic learning. Rather, it is situated within an open and diverse learning environment. He encouraged people to *“learn at school, from books, from one another, and from the people”* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011b, p. 361), while also emphasizing the importance of *“learning from books and newspapers, learning through work, learning from colleagues, and learning from the masses”* (Ho Chi Minh, 2011c, p. 143). Self-directed learning, therefore, should be understood as the proactive utilization of multiple sources of knowledge, integrating formal education with practical experience and community-based learning. This conception extends far beyond the traditional classroom and anticipates the idea of an open learning environment in which individuals can learn anytime, anywhere, and throughout every stage of life.

Taken together, the four core principles of lifelong learning in Ho Chi Minh's thought comprise: lifelong learning as the responsibility of both individuals and society; learning for holistic human development and service to society; learning closely connected with practice; and self-directed learning as the foundation of lifelong learning. These principles constitute a coherent theoretical framework in which the objectives, content, methods, and participants of learning are closely interconnected. Although formulated in a different historical context, they continue to

offer valuable theoretical insights for analyzing higher education reform from a lifelong learning perspective in the era of digital transformation.

3. Higher Education Reform in Vietnam from a Lifelong Learning Perspective

3.1. Vietnamese Higher Education Is Evolving toward a Lifelong Learning Model

Against the backdrop of digital transformation and the rapid expansion of the knowledge economy, higher education in Vietnam is gradually shifting from a traditional teaching-oriented model toward a more open, flexible, and lifelong learning-oriented system. This transformation is driven not only by the need to improve the quality of human resources but also by broader global trends in higher education, in which universities are increasingly expected to function as institutions that support learning throughout the entire lifespan rather than educating students only during a limited phase of life.

In recent years, the development of a learning society and an open education system has been reinforced through a series of national policies. Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW on the fundamental and comprehensive reform of education and training, Decision No. 1373/QĐ-TTg approving the *Learning Society Development Project for 2021–2030*, Decision No. 131/QĐ-TTg on strengthening information technology and digital transformation in education and training, and Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW (2025) all emphasize the development of an open education system, the promotion of lifelong learning, and the expansion of educational opportunities for all citizens. Together, these policy initiatives provide an important institutional foundation for universities to diversify their educational provision and broaden access to learning.

One of the clearest manifestations of this transformation has been the rapid expansion of online learning, distance education, and blended learning. Before 2019, only around 16% of Vietnamese university students had experienced online learning. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, however, most higher education institutions established learning management systems (LMSs), digital learning resources, and virtual classrooms as integral components of their educational provision (National

Economics University, 2023). Distance education has also expanded substantially, with enrollment increasing from approximately 11,000 students in the 2007–2008 academic year to more than 360,000 in 2021–2022 (National Economics University, 2023). These developments demonstrate that learning opportunities have become considerably more flexible, enabling learners to access higher education without being constrained by the traditional limitations of time and place.

Alongside these changes, many universities have introduced Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), short-term professional development programs, and professional certification courses to accommodate increasingly diverse learning needs. Following the Ministry of Education and Training's issuance of Decision No. 3784/QĐ-BGDĐT on the development of digital learning resources and MOOCs, numerous higher education institutions have actively contributed to the expansion of Vietnam's digital learning ecosystem. In addition to nationally coordinated MOOC initiatives, many universities have independently developed online courses that extend educational opportunities to students, working professionals, and the wider community. At the same time, short-term programs in areas such as artificial intelligence, data science, cybersecurity, digital transformation, and professional skills have expanded rapidly, reflecting a transition from the traditional notion of "education once for a lifetime" toward a model of continuous learning and regular skills renewal.

Another significant development has been the strengthening of collaboration between universities, industry, and local communities. Many higher education institutions have introduced industry-sponsored programs, work-integrated learning, collaborative laboratories, and professional development courses for the existing workforce. These initiatives not only enhance universities' responsiveness to labor market demands but also broaden their role from educating full-time students to providing lifelong learning and professional development opportunities for diverse groups of learners. Viewed through the lens of Ho Chi Minh's thought, these developments reflect a broader transition from a closed educational model toward an

open learning system that enables learning to become continuous, flexible, and closely connected with social practice.

3.2. Remaining Gaps in Higher Education Reform toward Lifelong Learning

Despite these encouraging developments, higher education reform in Vietnam still faces several challenges that prevent lifelong learning from becoming a defining characteristic of the higher education system.

First, although access to learning has expanded significantly through digital technologies, the conditions necessary to support lifelong learning remain uneven across institutions. Differences in digital infrastructure, financial resources, faculty capacity, and institutional governance have resulted in considerable disparities in the quality of online and distance education. The World Bank has similarly identified inequalities in institutional resources across universities and regions as one of the principal barriers to the modernization of Vietnamese higher education (Dilip et al., 2020). Consequently, opportunities for lifelong learning remain unequally distributed among learners.

Second, the higher education system has yet to establish a comprehensive framework for recognizing and accumulating learning outcomes acquired through flexible learning pathways. Although MOOCs, short-term training programs, and micro-credentials have developed rapidly, their recognition within formal degree programs remains limited. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which UNESCO (2012) identifies as a fundamental component of open education and lifelong learning, has thus far been explored or piloted only in a limited number of institutions. The absence of a unified national framework continues to constrain articulation among formal, continuing, and non-formal education, thereby reducing the flexibility that lifelong learning requires.

A further challenge concerns the educational philosophy underpinning teaching and learning in many universities. In numerous cases, digital transformation has focused primarily on digitizing teaching materials or introducing new technological platforms, while pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, and learning design

have changed much more slowly. As a result, learners often remain passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in inquiry, problem-solving, and self-directed learning. This creates a gap between technological innovation and the broader objective of cultivating lifelong learning competencies, since technology contributes meaningfully to educational reform only when it strengthens learners' capacity for independent learning, critical thinking, and continuous intellectual development.

Furthermore, although collaboration between universities, industry, and local communities has improved, it has not yet become a defining feature across the higher education sector. Many academic programs still lack effective mechanisms for regularly updating curricula in response to labor market changes, while reskilling and upskilling programs for working adults continue to occupy a relatively modest position compared with traditional degree education. At the same time, many employers have yet to regard lifelong learning as an integral component of human resource development strategies, leading to persistent mismatches between labor market needs and university provision.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that higher education reform in Vietnam has generated important organizational and technological changes but has yet to achieve a deeper transformation in educational philosophy. Lifelong learning requires more than expanding educational access or integrating digital technologies into teaching. More fundamentally, it requires the creation of learning environments that encourage continuous, self-directed, and practice-oriented learning while enabling individuals to develop throughout their lives. In this respect, the contemporary agenda for higher education reform converges closely with Ho Chi Minh's vision of lifelong learning.

3.3. Ho Chi Minh's Thought as an Approach to Higher Education Reform in Vietnam

The achievements and remaining gaps in Vietnam's higher education reform indicate that lifelong learning cannot simply be understood as expanding educational provision or applying digital technologies in teaching. Although these are necessary

conditions, they are not sufficient to establish a higher education system that genuinely embraces lifelong learning. From the perspective of Ho Chi Minh's thought, higher education reform should begin with a transformation of educational philosophy, in which learners are regarded as active agents of the learning process and universities serve as institutions that foster continuous learning for both individuals and society.

First, higher education reform should shift its focus from knowledge transmission to the development of learners' lifelong learning competencies. In Ho Chi Minh's thought, knowledge is not an end in itself but a means through which individuals cultivate themselves and contribute to society. Accordingly, the value of higher education should not be measured solely by the amount of knowledge students acquire during a degree program, but also by its ability to develop their capacity for self-directed learning, independent thinking, adaptability, and continuous learning beyond graduation. This orientation is likewise reflected in contemporary higher education systems worldwide as they respond to the rapid evolution of knowledge and technology.

Second, Ho Chi Minh's thought suggests expanding the role of universities from educational institutions into community learning centers. Whereas universities traditionally served primarily full-time students, they are now expected to provide learning opportunities for diverse groups of learners, including employees, public administrators, entrepreneurs, older adults, and individuals seeking to update their knowledge throughout their lives. This transformation requires universities to develop flexible learning systems, diversify short-term educational programs, expand open educational resources, and design learning opportunities that accommodate the characteristics of adult learners. In this sense, universities should function not only as degree-granting institutions but also as centers for knowledge sharing and the promotion of a lifelong learning culture.

Third, higher education reform should be more closely connected with socio-economic development. Ho Chi Minh consistently emphasized the principle of integrating learning with practice, viewing practice as both the purpose of education

and the criterion for evaluating the value of knowledge. In the current context, this principle calls on universities to strengthen partnerships with enterprises, government agencies, and local communities in order to respond more effectively to labor market demands while providing students with opportunities for experiential learning and authentic problem-solving. When knowledge is acquired and applied through addressing real-world challenges, lifelong learning becomes an intrinsic motivation rather than merely an institutional requirement.

Finally, Ho Chi Minh's principle of "placing self-study at the core" remains highly relevant in the digital age. The rapid development of artificial intelligence, big data, and online learning platforms has made access to knowledge easier than ever before, while simultaneously placing greater demands on individuals' capacity for self-directed learning, critical evaluation of information, and continuous knowledge renewal. Under these circumstances, the mission of higher education extends beyond knowledge transmission to fostering learners' motivation, learning strategies, and capacity for independent learning throughout life. These competencies provide the foundation for developing a workforce capable of adapting to the rapid transformations of science, technology, and labor markets.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that the enduring value of Ho Chi Minh's thought lies not only in emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning but also in providing a conceptual approach to higher education reform in Vietnam. From this perspective, educational reform should not be understood merely as technological innovation, curriculum revision, or changes in instructional methods. Rather, it should begin with a transformation of educational philosophy toward developing individuals' lifelong learning competencies. Only when universities genuinely become environments that nurture self-directed learning, maintain close connections with practice, and expand learning opportunities for all members of society can the goal of building a learning society be sustainably realized.

Conclusion

Lifelong learning constitutes an essential component of Ho Chi Minh's thought on human development and social progress. His views on the responsibility of

individuals and society for learning, the purposes of education, the principle of integrating learning with practice, and the central role of self-directed learning together form a coherent framework of thought that continues to provide valuable guidance for the development of Vietnamese education. In the context of digital transformation, the knowledge economy, and rapidly changing labor markets, these ideas retain both theoretical relevance and practical significance.

Recent reforms in Vietnamese higher education have achieved substantial progress through the expansion of open education, online learning, blended learning, and stronger university–industry collaboration. Nevertheless, persistent challenges relating to the recognition of learning outcomes, educational quality, digital inequality, and learners' self-directed learning capacities indicate that the realization of lifelong learning remains incomplete.

Drawing upon Ho Chi Minh's thought, this article argues that higher education reform should primarily be understood as a transformation of educational philosophy, in which the central objective is not merely technological innovation or changes in instructional delivery, but the development of lifelong learning competencies. Such an approach is essential not only for the modernization of higher education but also for building a learning society and developing high-quality human resources to support Vietnam's sustainable development in the context of international integration.

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